COOKING TIPS

How to use curry paste and powder in your cooking

There are regional variations in flavour, heat and colour — so how do you know when to use which one? Here's a breakdown.

by Kristen Eppich Updated Nov 3, 2017

Thai red curry paste.

Cooking with curry is great for multiple reasons: Curries aren't terribly fussy dishes, plus you can be flexible with the ingredients and cooking time. That said, whether you cook with curry often or are new to this complex combination, here's a quick refresher.

What is curry?

Defining curry is tricky because the varieties are truly endless. Depending on the exact spice combination you purchase or make, curries can differ from kitchen to kitchen, chef to chef and region to region. I think this is one of the reasons we sometimes feel intimidated — we aren't sure where to start. Predominant in Southeast Asian cooking, curries consist of an extensive spice and herb combination that usually (but not always) includes some hot chilies. Curries like to simmer, building flavour as they go, so each dish can easily be manipulated depending on spice combination, creating some of the most spicy, aromatic and flavourful dishes.

Related: 11 curry recipes to warm up with

Curry powder v. curry paste

Curry powder

A blend of spices, curry powder typically includes turmeric, coriander and red peppers (among others) and this mix is most readily available in supermarkets. The range of curry powders depends on its origin and region. For example, an Indian blend versus a Chinese curry blend will differ significantly in flavour. If you've avoided cooking with curry because you are sensitive to spiciness (heat-wise), then I suggest starting with curry powder. Curry powder itself does not have a lot of heat, but keeps its delightful, mellow curry flavour.

Curry paste

In addition to being a blend of spices, curry paste also includes oils and fresh ingredients (such as ginger and garlic). They are potent in flavour and don't require much or any other seasoning. Thai curries tend to be made with curry paste and often use coconut milk in combination with the pastes to make either the soup or the sauce. Thai curry recipes can include vegetables, chicken, fish or seafood and fresh aromatic herbs such as mint, cilantro and basil. Typically, Thai curries use a red, green

or yellow paste and range from mild to knock-your-socks-off spicy! The pastes are widely available in the Asian section of supermarkets and once opened, the paste can last up to six months in the fridge.

Kitchen note: Our Thai red curry paste gets its colour from red chilies, red onions and tomatoes. Switching out the red chilies for green chilies, and adding green herbs such as basil and cilantro transform this paste into a green curry paste.

Thai vs. Indian curry

Thai curry

Thai green curry is common in Thai curry dishes and is often accompanied by the flavours of Kaffir lime. The Chatelaine Kitchen's Thai fish curry is a soupy spicy-sweet curry made with green curry paste. Thai yellow curry typically includes lemongrass and tends to be slightly more mellow than green and red as it gets its unique colour from turmeric and some other spices.

Indian curry

When it comes to traditional Indian curries, there are plenty of variations. Some popular Indian curries include: Tikka Masala, on the milder side of the curries; Madras, a moderately spicy curry; and Vindaloo, considered a very strong and spicy curry. What distinguishes one Indian curry from another is its region of origin — so read the label as they will often give a flavour description and indicate the level of heat.

Here are 15 ways you can use curry pastes and powders:

Gallery

Curry paste and curry powder

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Thai red curry paste

Ta-ta takeout! Whipping up this favourite pantry staple from scratch is easier than you think — it's ready in just 10 minutes! Get the recipe.